Motivation for the Research

Language is central to teaching and learning, both socially-mediated endeavors dependent on context (Schleppegrell, 2004; Vygotsky, 1987). Dramatic increases in the enrollment of linguistically diverse students within U.S. public schools coupled with increased expectations for all students to interact with complex texts, rich disciplinary language, and academic discourse features highlights an increasing need for repositioning language and language expertise in the classroom. Such changes require a paradigm shift within teacher preparation programs (Kibler, Valdes, & Walqui, 2014; Zeichner, 2005) and capacity building amongst teacher educators. Yet presently, many teacher preparation programs across the country fall short of ensuring that every teacher candidate is prepared to work with the culturally and linguistically diverse students who likely comprise a portion of their student body (Samson & Collins, 2012). Research, including the current study, is beginning to detail what teachers need to know about language learning and teaching language in order to be able to appropriately scaffold instruction and support learners’ academic language development (Harper & de Jong, 2005; Lucas & Villegas, 2012, 2013; Telez & Waxman, 2005). This qualitative, multi-case study investigates the efforts of five university-based teacher preparation programs across the U.S. selected as positive exemplars of diverse approaches to support teacher candidates’ work with linguistically diverse students.

Research Questions

Three parallel and complimentary research questions were addressed by this study.

1. How are the selected university-based teacher preparation programs designed to prepare all teacher candidates to serve English learners (ELs)?
2. How do individual teacher educators in these programs contribute to or enact a focus on preparing teacher candidates to serve ELs?
3. What is the impact of these programs on recent graduates?
Research Methodology

This study utilized multiple case study methodology (Stake, 1995, 2006) to explore the social construction of meaning that takes places within the bounded system of individual university-based teacher preparation programs, within the policy constraints and social traditions of that particular state/context, and reoccurring themes across research sites.

Participants. A total of 49 teacher education faculty members and 15 recent graduates from five institutions located in five different states (California, Florida, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Vermont) consented to participate in the study. Faculty participants included: university administrators and program heads (e.g., Deans, Department Chairs, Program Coordinators); teacher educators specializing in the teaching of content areas (e.g., Math Methods, Science Methods); and teacher educators whose expertise focused on second language education. Additionally, interviews and classroom visits with recent graduates occurred at four of the five research sites. Research sites were purposefully selected to offer a distribution across a number of criteria including: geographic region, program size, and university size and mission, as well as factors related to the EL population of the state and/or policy mandates.

Data sources and analysis. Drawing upon ethnographic methods, data was sourced through four methods: 1) artifact collection of programmatic and public documents, 2) individual interviews with teacher education faculty and recent graduates, 3) observational field notes from visits to teacher education courses and K-12 classrooms, and 4) field notes and reflexive memos from campus visits. An iterative method of coding on the entire data set was employed, to first create a descriptive coding schema (Saldaña, 2009) followed by a structural and thematic analysis examine to uncover overarching themes, threads, and patterns found in the language forms and choices of my participants’ voices.

Summary of Findings

Programmatic practices and design. Responding to the first research question, I sought to understand ways that teacher preparation programs have framed their work in preparing teacher candidates to serve ELs. Teacher education programs have multiple options of programmatic pathways for supporting teacher candidate learning around teaching ELs, all of which are contextually dependent on local policies, institutional priorities, and available resources. Based on existing literature and my analysis of the data, I propose a typology of six possible approaches that teacher preparation programs may take to address candidate readiness to serve ELs: no specific coverage, minimal coverage, offering embedded content, adding a course, and two levels of curricular infusion (infusion and infusion “plus”). Each approach is characterized not only by the particular programmatic structures required but also by the impact on demands for faculty autonomy, collaboration or shared expertise, connections with clinical experiences, and the resulting depth of candidate knowledge.

The analysis of data across institutions also reveals several areas of influence for programmatic approaches. First, the success of programmatic pathways is influenced by institutional structural responses. Given the priorities of different licensure programs and the expectations for teaching responsibilities once candidates graduate, course content and offerings for candidates enrolled in elementary vs. secondary programs are necessarily different. Differences appear in the timing, length, content, and depth of course offerings. Depending on a given approach, a number of curricular design factors, including the selection of theoretical perspectives, course assignments (e.g., tied to fieldwork or not), faculty familiarity with content, and coherence with other content in the program may also be affected. More enigmatic characteristics of faculty such as departmental culture, existing patterns of
collaboration or autonomy, or perceptions of content ownership may cause tension or influence programmatic selection of a particular approach.

**Teacher educator faculty development.** My second research question focused on examining how the teacher educators enacting planned programming are supported to engage teacher candidates around issues of language and language education. This study contributes to the literature by offering evidence of the institutional practices, structures, and resources available to support faculty learning and capacity building efforts for teacher educators at the five institutions under study. Findings confirm the importance of learning opportunities among teacher educators, especially in areas like language education, where faculty may have no first-hand experience or prior training. Participant data indicate that more interest and investment in faculty development efforts occur when programs and learning activities are planned as ongoing rather than one-time events, relevant to their work, provide opportunities for collaboration across disciplinary lines, and are planned by strong leaders with a vision for building capacity.

**Experiences of recent graduates.** The final research question focused on understanding how programmatic practices impact the practices of recent graduates teaching ELs. Findings from the study offer insights into what former candidates report learning from coursework and clinical experiences related to the specific needs of and instructional supports for language learners. Consistent with existing research, participant responses imply that teaching practice is strongly influenced by both coursework and clinical experiences, but also mediated by background experiences and individual dispositions. Findings suggest that while teacher candidates reported significant programmatic emphasis on appropriate pedagogical practices for teaching ELs, recent graduates showed less depth of understanding on why specific methods or practices were meant to be more effective for linguistically diverse students. Further, participants’ responses indicated that teacher candidates do not always perceive cohesive messaging from programs around expectations for serving language learners. Differential expectations and mentoring around language was most frequently seen in the messaging received by graduates from clinical faculty. Lastly, graduates recognized that their own individual funds of knowledge (e.g., life experiences, linguistic repertoires) were a major factor affecting their learning from educator preparation programs.

Most troubling, findings also confirm an emerging trend that many “quasi-prepared individuals now function as de facto language specialists in their districts” (Harper, de Jong, & Platt, 2008, p. 270), particularly when states do not offer guidance or distinguish differences in the instructional roles or employment potential of ESOL-endorsed (or authorized) versus ESOL-certified teachers. My analysis of participant responses suggests that graduates’ expertise in teaching ELs is often presumed by the districts that hire them. In many cases, these former candidates who are new to teaching often are expected to take on roles as the sole source of support for ELs in their classes. Further, many recent graduates reported being positioned as language experts by their schools with extremely limited access to more experienced educators with expertise in language or ESL/ESOL who could mentor them. Ultimately, while participants were nearly universally accepting of the shared responsibility for teaching language learners and often described coursework on language learning and teaching as an area of programmatic emphasis, they still did not feel prepared for the responsibility of being the sole “language expert” educator available to students.
Implications

Based on the findings of my study, I offer several recommendations on offering programming to prepare teacher candidates, building capacity among faculty to deliver this content, and cautionary implications of this preparation for policy makers and administrators in charge of hiring new teachers.

Considerations for programmatic design. Programs should be designed so that teacher candidates have the opportunity to focus on specific methods and theories of learning and teaching language as standalone coursework, but also to see key themes taken up and reprised across coursework. Ideally, clinical placements should occur in schools where cultural and linguistic diversity is present, but varies. Placements should be supported by classroom teachers and university supervisors who are both familiar with programmatic expectations for how candidates will demonstrate knowledge of supporting language learners, ensuring consistent messaging between coursework and fieldwork, along with increased collaboration between school- and university-based teacher educators.

Considerations for programmatic content. While the identification of specific content is likely germane to the epistemological perspectives and knowledge-base of available language education faculty, standalone content should be carefully planned to ensure a distribution of focus on theory and practice, but perhaps more importantly, to support candidates to understand why particular pedagogies or scaffolds are effective for language learners. Wherever possible, language education faculty may wish to work in collaboration with other teacher educators (and even other faculty with expertise in second language or applied linguistics outside the school/department of education), to identify and systematize opportunities throughout foundational or disciplinary coursework when key content or themes relevant to serving ELs may be introduced or bear repetition.

Considerations for faculty development. Given the recommendation that programs both highlight language education content within standalone coursework and infuse language pedagogies and learner scaffolds throughout coursework, it would be expected that faculty other than those with disciplinary expertise in language will be responsible for teaching coursework. After undergoing an internal needs assessment, programs should decide what faculty development is needed and for whom, with a lens towards building capacity. Beyond enlisting the support of external experts, it may be helpful to also examine available in-house resources and structures (e.g., peer coaching, collaborative learning through faculty learning communities, tapping into campus-wide faculty learning resources), which ultimately may have a more sustained impact on faculty practice.

Considerations of/or policy. For teacher and teacher candidates in a growing number of states, policy requirements now mandate that all educators/candidates demonstrate their ability to teach ELs, awarding them related add-on endorsements or authorizations. While the policies are often well-intended, evidence from this study suggests the possibility that districts have increased expectations of responsibility for non-language-specialist teachers to offering language support, raising questions of how well English Learners in those states are being served. Further, the marginalization of language teacher expertise appears to be an unintended consequence of this policy rollout. While teacher educators working within these policy contexts clearly must adhere to the requirements of such policies within their programmatic offerings, it is recommended that the field begin to document the teaching responsibilities of non-specialist graduates, building a case for elevating the professional expertise of language educators to specialist status.
References


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